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# Clarifying Jurisdiction in the Library Workforce: Tasks, Support Staff, and Professional Librarians

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## ABSTRACT

Jurisdiction refers to those tasks or responsibilities that are seen as central to and exclusively controlled by a profession. When library work is examined, what is the proper jurisdiction for professional, masters-level librarians? This study examines the definition of *professional* with respect to library workers by using data from a national survey of competencies for library support staff and by comparing American Library Association-approved competencies for beginning MLS librarians and certified support staff. According to this analysis, professional librarians are those who know context (history, theory), do research, educate patrons, and manage people and collections. They are not necessarily those who provide direct services.

## INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to say that some people who work in a library are professionals—and others are not? People within librarianship are separated by a vertical line from other professions, and by horizontal lines demarking levels of library work. Vertically, there are more or less permeable boundaries between librarianship and data management, curation/preservation, education generally, instructional technology, administration/organizational management, and specialized subject knowledge. Horizontally, within library work, there are boundaries primarily oriented around the iconic master's degree (MLS): who has it, who does not; who is a professional, who is support or specialist staff.

A key part of understanding the nature and evolution of professions is the concept of "jurisdiction": who is allowed to do what; the work that each profession performs and controls (Abbott, 1988, 1998). Jurisdiction is constantly changing in response to developments in technology (i.e.,

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mechanization/computerization of functions that were formerly expert work), clientele (employer preferences, such as for in-house control of expertise and work product), and competition (alternative professions claiming expertise). Examples include computer-assisted drafting in architecture, off-shoring of information technology in accounting, and use of advanced-practice nurses for primary health care. Current librarianship encounters Google, ChaCha, and KGB used for short-answer reference work, aides assigned to run school libraries, and instructional technologists assisting faculty with classroom information preparation.

The library workforce includes a wide range of roles. The MLS degree exists as a semi-bright line, in many libraries, in many roles, dividing “professional” librarians from “support staff,” variously termed paraprofessionals, staff, and clerks. The MLS acts as a “trait” marker for professional status, but a trait itself is not synonymous with jurisdiction. Persons in the professions of nursing and medicine both claim some jurisdiction over the diagnosis of medical conditions, even though by “traits” their professions are brightly distinct.

Jurisdiction over library work is a very contentious issue on a micro as well as philosophical level—sometimes easy to glide over in day-to-day life but disturbing when considered as part of a trend toward or away from some ideal. Who catalogs items? Who is a cataloger? Who does reference work? Who is a reference librarian? Different library workplaces practice different answers at different times—and who a librarian is, is in part defined by who non-librarians are.

The American Library Association has developed a national (voluntary) certification system for library support staff (LSS), with sets of universal and specialized competencies. The process involved substantial input from a panel of experts, from organizations, and from surveys answered by thousands of LSS, MLS, and director respondents. Simultaneously, the ALA designed and published a set of core competencies for MLS librarians. This article:

- reviews several perspectives on the concept of “profession,” with special attention to jurisdiction and within-field/internal divisions;
- analyzes data generated by the ALA certification project about the roles of support staff in academic and public libraries;
- compares the desired or expected roles of LSS to those identified as the specific jurisdiction of MLS librarians.

All of this speaks to the division of labor in libraries, and to increased clarity regarding intra-librarianship jurisdiction.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The definition of profession as a sociological phenomenon has been the subject of much research and theorizing both broadly as a concept and

individually in particular fields of work (Carter, 2007). Ways of conceptualizing professions can be roughly grouped into four types of approaches—those that focus on: a profession in itself, a profession in relation to non-professionals/lay people, a profession in competition with or relation to other professions, and intra-profession competition or relationships.

A “trait” definition of profession examines each individual field of work and group of workers—each profession in itself. Their structure and characteristics are measured against a series of “traits” that are thought to define what a profession is. Some of the common elements of a set of profession traits include an advanced knowledge domain involving specialized initial and continuing education, an ethical code, and high autonomy in practice (Leicht & Fennell, 2001, p. 26).

The trait approach has always posed some problems for librarianship. Librarianship has primarily been not only practiced in, but to a large extent defined by, institutions. Doctors are independent of hospitals and lawyers are partner-owners but only in some areas of information brokering do individual librarians have their own economic relations with clients. Organized librarianship has a well-established code of ethics, but there is no mechanism for enforcement, so it is aspirational rather than pragmatically effective. Nor is there an ongoing, professionally organized continuing education requirement. Librarianship is not alone in these deviations. Even occupations that are traditionally considered professions, such as teaching, nursing, and the military, do not all match all traits proposed. The main focus of the trait approach is singular and inward: does each individual occupation match a hypothetical ideal set of characteristics? Different professions exist only as points for mental comparison: how does the Library Bill of Rights compare to the Hippocratic Oath, as a system of ethics?

Another approach focuses on distinguishing professionals from non-professionals. One item in the trait approach is the complexity of the knowledge domain (Leicht & Fennell, 2001; also see Honea, 2000). This is bound together with another commonly included trait—a long period of education and/or apprenticeship that is needed to attain mastery of complex subject matter, coupled sometimes with continuing education requirements. Complexity serves to create and define by differentiating professionals from nonprofessionals in two important ways. The lengthy education provides group socialization: doctors are those who have all gone through internships. Then, the quantity and complex quality of the knowledge needed excludes outsiders from offering opinions on the areas in which the profession practices.

In librarianship, the definition of *profession* has relied heavily on this feature, as seen in both educational qualifications and job classifications or wording. Librarians are frequently defined as those who possess a Master’s of Library Science (i.e., ALA, “Becoming a Librarian”); the Master’s of Library Science degree is defined by most universities as a professional

degree; the ALA-MLS is legally considered a bona fide occupational qualification, at least for academic library hiring (*Merwine v. Board of Trustees*, 1985). The creation of a unitary set of competences for the beginning MLS-level librarian implies a general and also complex set of knowledge. Professional program accreditation by the American Library Association reinforces this aspect; the ALA accredits only master's level programs, not doctoral nor paraprofessional programs.

Therefore in experience (graduate school courses), in job requirements (ALA-MLS required), and in knowledge (theory and practice of information organization, instruction, preservation, etc.), professionalism in librarianship is pragmatically defined against people who have not had these experiences and attained this knowledge.

A profession can also be seen as collective economic actor: that is, a group which consciously controls and indeed monopolizes certain tasks (Seibert, 2007; Friedman, 2002 [1962]). This is the view of a profession that successfully defines and economically defends itself in opposition to other professions (not nonprofessionals as in the previous point). For example, only lawyers may practice law; in the United Kingdom, only barristers may appear in court; in the United States only tax lawyers, accountants, and enrolled agents may represent someone with the IRS.

Formal occupational monopoly is a challenge for librarianship. School libraries offer a stark and visibly volatile example of the problem of monopoly. Are school library media specialists "classified" (professional, certified) personnel? Does every library require a professional? Does every school need a library? Wiegand (1999) argues that the early entrance of women into librarianship as a profession was in some respects accepted because those in power saw librarianship as auxiliary and not central; it did not matter that women were included because librarianship was not important, a monopoly not worth enforcing.

The relation of professions to each other is a next step and a crucial part of understanding not only what a profession is at one point in time but how each profession is created, changes, develops, and possibly disappears. The work of Abbott (1988) is particularly useful in developing a competitive functional understanding of professions. He focused on the concept of "jurisdiction" to describe those areas that are considered to be the proper and exclusive task of each profession. Each task exists as a sort of contest over which profession shall exercise control. This perspective analyzes professions as they exist in competition with each other—not (only) with the mass of all nonprofessionals. This has played an important part in the historical development of individual professions and is a lively issue in all professions. Who can prescribe? Who draws blood? Who counsels people with mental health issues?

This is seen vividly within academic libraries, special libraries, and the information industry. Who selects doctoral-level research

materials—librarians or PhD people within the field? Who assists professors with integrating information resources into online courses—librarians or instructional technologists? Who designs library retrieval systems—librarians or computer programmers?

One thing the preceding perspectives share is that they focus on each profession as primarily a vertically homogenous unit. That is, doctors may be a profession; doctors differ from non-doctors; and psychiatrists compete with psychologists over mental health care, but each profession, however horizontally related to other professions or divided from the mass of unskilled workers, is primarily seen as unitary within itself. Bucher and Strauss (1961) add the notion of “segmentation” to describe subsets within professions, important ways in which significant groups within acknowledged professional boundaries differ from each other and may differ from that group’s apparent defining characteristics, such as doctors who do not see patients. However, they are all still doctors.

This leaves out intra-occupational analysis. Where is the boundary drawn within a field or occupation itself between people who are considered professionals and those who are not, but who nevertheless work in the field and thus are considered in a sense to be in the same group as the professionals? Wiegand’s description of librarianship as a profession lays out four elements: institution, expertise, authority, and character (1989). To possess the right “character” is to be a member of the accepted “normative” class in society, and was originally, and continues to be, achieved by requiring a bachelor’s level of education, in liberal arts, before entering professional education. This model contrasts with some other routes into “librarianship.” Before the late 1990s, there were numerous bachelor’s-level library science programs, and for media specialists undergraduate-level preparation was common. Other countries in Asia and Europe also use a bachelor’s level preparation or have library science as the field of study from the beginning of post-secondary education (Audunson, 2007). But in general, to define librarians as those possessing graduate level qualifications again restricts analysis only to that homogenous group, ignoring library workers of other types.

Much of the literature on the definitions and dynamics of librarianship as a profession has been devoted to describing how or to what extent librarianship or library science or information science have the traits associated with the definition of profession, or proposing new conceptual models (e.g., Wiegand, 1999), or exploring tensions between practice/practitioners and theory or the academic disciplinary aspects of the study of librarianship (e.g., Cronin & Davenport, 1996). There is a separate literature on staffing, which ranges from broad prevalence studies (e.g., Johnson, 1996, Brunsting, 2008), to classificatory arguments (e.g., Jones & Stivers, 2004), to individual case studies (Fama & Martin, 2009) and personal perspectives (Hill, 2008) in which the assignment of tasks to

particular classes of library employees is described. These often have no theoretical background; on occasion the literature references ethics or defining values of librarianship as a whole (e.g., Dowell, 2003). There appears to be no large source of empirical data on how people who work in libraries view their own tasks, across a range of library types, library positions, and library worker levels.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

This study uses a set of empirical data and two sets of profession statements to explore directly the question of jurisdiction or task authority, within levels of librarianship. It examines intra-librarian status identification not through traits but in relation to task jurisdiction. This is an inductive approach. It looks for clues in practice that can be used to create a schema for distinguishing levels of professional and support staff work.

The data set is a major national opt-in survey of librarians, library directors, and support staff concerning knowledge and skills (competencies) that should or should not be considered important for library support staff in academic and public libraries. Respondents to the survey rated each individual item as to whether it was not important, important, and very important, for library support staff. Because this is a post-facto analysis of a survey that was not specifically designed to measure opinions about jurisdiction itself, there are limitations to the analysis that can be conducted. Nevertheless, it presents a set of empirical observations from a wide range of library respondents that can illuminate some of the current questions about intra-librarian identity.

This analysis first uses quantitative data from the national survey to identify areas where there is general agreement or disagreement on the support staff role. It then conducts a qualitative analysis of the items to identify themes.

The results of this analysis are then compared with differences between the sets of LSS and MLS competencies/competences, as approved by the American Library Association in 2009. These represent current expert and politically (organizationally) validated perspectives on roles and jurisdictions within work in libraries and information agencies. The MLS competencies are more broadly stated and focused than the LSS, which were intentionally focused on only academic and public library settings.

### METHODOLOGY

The source of the empirical data on individual opinions is a survey distributed by the American Library Association Allied Professional Association (ALA-APA) concerning competencies for library support staff. The survey had over 3,500 respondents, making it the largest pool of respondents on any ALA topic in recent times. While the survey was created for evaluative and program planning purposes, not research, use of its data for further

research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

The purpose of the survey was to provide practitioner input into the design of sets of competencies for library support staff in academic and public libraries, as the foundation for a nationally-recognized ALA-administered individual certification system for support staff, the ALA-Library Support Staff Certification Project (LSSCP). The LSSCP focused on academic and public libraries as the largest and more homogeneous constituencies of library support staff; school, special, and other types of libraries were considered to either have their own standards (e.g., state guidelines for media specialists) or to differ too widely (special) to be included in the initial certification project.

*Survey Content: Competencies*

The survey consisted of twelve competency sets: areas of work within libraries that library support staff engage in. Three competency sets were general to all library work, while nine were more functionally specialized:

General:

- Foundations of Library Service
- Technology
- Communications and Teamwork

Functional:

- Cataloging [including acquisitions]
- Collection Development
- Reference
- Public Programming
- Reader's Advisory
- Youth Services
- Marketing
- Management and Supervision

Within each competency set, there were two sets of statements. One was stated in terms of knowledge: the library support staff should know X. The other was stated in terms of behavior or skills: library support staff should be able to do Y. There were from nine to twenty statements in each competency set. Survey respondents could choose any or all of the eleven areas to review. One of the areas had two separate subgroups: cataloging and acquisitions.

In June 2009, the ALA approved the program and in January 2010, the LSSC program began to accept what the ALA called candidates. The finalized competency sets for the program were adjusted according to the input from the survey and from deliberations by experts in each area. Two areas were deleted entirely (Programming and Marketing) and Acquisitions, Collection Development, and Cataloging were reorganized.



The first analysis discussed here is based on the original survey's wording, and not on the finalized competencies that are reviewed later.

Respondents could choose to address any or all of the competency sets. While responding to each statement was optional (completion was not required), more than 95 percent of those responding to any set rated all of the statements. For each statement, the rating scale was, "not important" (1), "important" (2), and "very important" (3). In analysis, these were treated mathematically as Likert-type interval data.

The lists of statements were created by the staff and advisory council of the LSSCP. These consisted of library consultants with extensive background in competency and certification programs (Karen Stregge, Nancy Bolt) and representatives from constituent associations within ALA such as: library type (Association of College and Research Libraries—ACRL and the Public Libraries Association—PLA); library function (Reference and User Services Association—RUSA), and support staff (Library Support Staff Interests Round Table—LSSIRT). Given this, it is not surprising that the survey respondents considered almost all of the proposed competencies to be at least "important."

### *Respondents*

Because the link for the electronic survey was distributed primarily by listservs and e-mail groups, the number of respondents cannot be calculated as a percentage response rate. Without random selection, it is not appropriate to make statistical generalizations about the extent to which respondents represented a population of library workers. Despite this inferential limitation, it is important to note the large number of respondents. In addition, their distribution among library type and between librarians and support staff roughly corresponds to proportions that have been measured for American academic and public library staff through the Public Libraries Survey (Institute for Library and Museum Services, n.d.) and Academic Library Survey (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Respondents identified themselves in one of the following work or status categories: library directors, those with the MLS (MLS), support staff (LSS), and several other options grouped for convenience as "other." Conceptually, an overlap exists between "library director" and "MLS" and also the other and even the support staff category. The analysis here focuses solely on data from those who self-identified as MLS or as LSS. Pragmatically, this avoids trying to decide how to classify "directors." With respect to the theory of jurisdiction, this is consistent with the purpose of this study, which is to examine library workers' own perceptions of roles and status levels. It is less important for this study, in other words, to understand what administrators (directors) think than to consider the opinions of the broader population of MLS and support staff library workers.



Similarly, although the focus of the LSSCP survey was to identify competencies relevant to academic and public librarianship, respondents could be from a range of library types. Following the idea of greater homogeneity within groups, this study analyzes only data from those respondents who identified themselves with public libraries and with academic libraries.

Table 1 shows the overall universe of respondents by library type and status category. Bold type indicates the subsets whose data are analyzed here: MLS and LSS, public and academic.

### *Ratings and Jurisdictional Categories*

Whatever the imperfections of the ratings, they are suggestive indicators of respondents' opinions about task jurisdiction. Put another way, they provide some data about what people think is important for library support staff, and by giving a clearer view of support staff roles, indicate by absence or contrast the roles of MLS librarians.

Overall, most items were rated between important and very important; the average rating across all respondents, all items and all areas was 2.42. As noted above the overall results tend toward using "important" as the starting point because the items had strong face validity due to expert selection—that is, only those items which a group of experts considered important were included. In addition, LSS themselves on average rated items higher than did MLS respondents (average 0.08 higher overall: 2.46 both academic and public LSS compared to 2.35 academic MLS and 2.39 public MLS), which may reflect the fact that the survey was about library support staff and their roles, so it had higher resonance and validity for them.

It is consistent with general scaling studies to find that the effective midpoint of a scale is higher than the scale's formal midpoint (here, 2). The effective midpoint occurs usually approximately halfway between the middle and the top of the scale (e.g., on satisfaction, Applegate, 1993; on LibQUAL+, Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2002). In terms of this study's scale, the effective midpoint would be 2.5.

For the analysis reported here, a score of 2.75 or above is designated high and one at 2.25 or below is designated low—comparatively speaking. Because it is important to keep in mind that these are relative ratings, the wording is "high" (2.75 being both relatively and absolutely high), "relative-low," and "absolute-low," which identifies items scoring below the 2.0 "important" mark. Items rated in the middle ground are left out to create a very conservative test. The analysis focuses on items only when they are high or relatively or absolutely low.

Out of 166 total items only 25 were rated absolute-low on average by any of the groups, and only 9 by all four groups. The designers of the survey succeeded in listing items that most respondents (85 percent of items) or at least some respondent groups (95 percent) considered at least somewhat important for support staff.

Table 1. Respondents to Library Support Staff Competencies Survey

| Library Type        | LSS        | MLS        | Director | Other | All Types |
|---------------------|------------|------------|----------|-------|-----------|
| Academic library    | <b>658</b> | <b>572</b> | 210      | 139   | 1579      |
| Public library      | <b>438</b> | <b>560</b> | 298      | 230   | 1526      |
| Other library types | 114        | 181        | 67       | 124   | 486       |
| Total               | 1210       | 1313       | 575      | 493   | 3591      |

Bold indicates respondents whose data are included in this study

With respect to jurisdiction, when items are rated high (in effect, very important) by both MLS and LSS, then there is no jurisdictional conflict. These are tasks and responsibilities that all agree are part of the LSS role. Items that score in the rough middle of the range for both groups are similarly within a zone of general agreement.

When items are rated high by one group and low by the other, then there is an element of jurisdictional conflict—that is, there is disagreement between MLS and LSS respondents about whether something is important for LSS.

There is an issue in interpreting what agreement on a low rating means. All of the items were phrased specifically in terms of what was important for library support staff. A low rating might mean either that the activity involved was something that support staff—as support staff—do or should do, or that it was not something that library staff—any library staff—do or should do. That is, it might be important or unimportant to the library as a whole, rather than to one level of library worker compared to another. For example, collection management was rated low, on average, but it is very unlikely that this is considered unimportant to libraries, but academic library respondents also gave low marks to public programming and to marketing, things that they might think of as campus not library activities.

A particular group of items was identified in which LSS gave the items lower scores than MLS respondents did. Since LSS overall rated items more highly than MLS did, these are “dog-bites-man” findings that deserve special attention.

Finally, the ALA Core Competences for MLS Librarians and LSSCP Core Competencies for Library Support Staff are compared, to each other and to the findings from the survey results.

## RESULTS

The survey included twelve areas, with numbers of respondents in each of the four groups ranging from thirty-two (academic MLS responding to Youth Services) to 446 (public MLS responding to Foundations). Table 2 shows the average scores across items for each area, for each group, in descending order of scores from public LSS respondents.

Table 2. Average Importance Scores

Average Scores Across all Items in Each Set

|                               | Public |      | Academic |      |
|-------------------------------|--------|------|----------|------|
|                               | LSS    | MLS  | LSS      | MLS  |
| Teamwork                      | 2.71   | 2.67 | 2.70     | 2.64 |
| Foundations                   | 2.65   | 2.58 | 2.61     | 2.55 |
| Technology                    | 2.56   | 2.50 | 2.58     | 2.50 |
| Management-Supervision        | 2.56   | 2.36 | 2.52     | 2.36 |
| Reference                     | 2.52   | 2.56 | 2.57     | 2.48 |
| Access services               | 2.52   | 2.40 | 2.59     | 2.55 |
| Marketing                     | 2.48   | 2.29 | 2.37     | 2.21 |
| Youth services                | 2.47   | 2.41 |          |      |
| Public programming            | 2.32   | 2.18 | 2.27     | 2.13 |
| Cataloging (and acquisitions) | 2.30   | 2.33 | 2.49     | 2.41 |
| Readers advisory              | 2.28   | 2.20 | 2.07     | 1.89 |
| Collection development        | 2.20   | 2.14 | 2.33     | 2.16 |

### *High-Low Items*

The appendix reports all items within the 166 total that were rated especially high or low by any of the groups

A careful review of these items was conducted, using an inductive qualitative approach that identified groupings from the items themselves, instead of from preset categories. Common themes were identified and then tested for outliers and internal consistency. Exact wording of the specific items can be found in the appendix (wording and ratings for all items are available from the author).

The four competency areas (Teamwork, Foundations, Technology, and Management/Supervision) are the most broadly-based or generic. The first three were considered core areas that would be relevant to all library support staff, and, except for cataloging rated by academic library respondents, they had the highest numbers of respondents. The results diverged in an interesting way. Roughly, most Teamwork items were considered very important. Foundations had primarily “middle” rated items with one lower outlier (knowing how libraries are governed). Technology had a mix of high- and low-rated items that seemed to vary primarily by library type, and Management had distinct differences between LSS and MLS respondents: LSS tended to rate things high (three) or middle (seventeen items), while MLS respondents had no high-rated items and a number of relative-low and absolute-low rated items.

There appear to be four areas in which the data show that the tasks or knowledge are not considered to be appropriate for library support staff. These items were rated low by all respondents or by MLS respondents: theoretical or basic knowledge; management-specific responsibilities; analysis and a set of tasks that nobody seemed to feel important for either support staff or perhaps for libraries in general.

There were some items for which type of library seemed to determine differences more than whether the respondents were LSS or MLS. These were: office software (in Technology, low-rated by public), knowing community demographics (in Management, low-rated by academic), knowing about publishers (in Collection Management, low-rated by public), and catalog knowledge and copy cataloging (low-rated by public). Of all the areas, collection development had the most pervasive by-library difference. For academic library respondents, only one item was rated relative-low (recommending procedures), but for public library respondents, almost all items in this category—seven out of nine—were rated low.

*Theory.* Items which had wording that related to basic background knowledge or theoretical principles were more likely to be rated as of lesser importance for LSS, especially (but not exclusively) by MLS respondents. In the basic or generic competencies, knowing “how libraries are governed and funded and the place of libraries within organizations or government structures” was rated relative-low by all groups and absolute-low by academic library MLS respondents. Two items from Technology that were worded at the big-picture level were rated by MLS respondents from both academic and public libraries relative-low: knowing “general trends and developments of appropriate technology in all library functions and services” and “the role and responsibilities of libraries for introducing relevant applications of technology to the public, including assistive technology.” MLS also rated relative-low an item about assistive technologies. In Management, an item for “principles and the value of cooperation and collaborating” was rated low. In Youth Services, knowledge of child and youth development and legal issues were also rated low. Copyright and other legal issues were low-rated by both MLS and LSS respondents (in Access Services, Reference, and Youth Services areas).

*Management.* Some tasks seem to fall into a group that traditionally represents management responsibilities. These were rated low by both LSS and MLS respondents. All groups agreed that principles and practices of budgeting and fund-raising, and monitoring and adjusting spending were of low importance, rated relative-low even by LSS and absolute-low by MLS respondents. Developing policies was also rated low by public library MLS respondents. In Youth Services advocacy and public relations were rated low. Academic library MLS respondents rated as not important for LSS to recommend acquisition or weeding procedures.

*Analysis.* Related to management is analysis. Planning in conjunction with analysis or evaluation was rated very low by MLS respondents, such as in the management area, “develop and implement recommendations for new services and programs based on analysis and interpretation of data about various aspects of library operations.” In public programming, a similar item about evaluating effectiveness of programs was rated low by MLS respondents.

*Support Level.* A group of items related to the “support” level of work saw some sharp distinctions between LSS and MLS respondents. Academic MLS respondents placed a very high value of the importance of LSS knowing how to make reference referrals; LSS (and public library MLS) considered this only of moderate importance. Library support staff rated searching skills (in Reference) and helping users find materials by format (in Readers Advisory) high, but MLS did not. In Youth Services, MLS rated assistance with youth collection development low for LSS, and all groups rated low having LSS “work cooperatively with personnel in schools.” In Cataloging, it is possible that “metadata” is considered too high-level for LSS or that it is not (yet) relevant for most libraries, as it was very low-rated by all respondents.

### *LSS Lower Than MLS*

Over the entire survey, LSS respondents tended to rate all skills and knowledge items higher than did MLS respondents. This makes it important to notice when LSS actually rated items lower than did MLS respondents: what are the items that MLS librarians thought were more important for LSS than the LSS thought themselves?

One area stands out for both academic and public library respondents: Cataloging. For academic respondents, 29 percent of the items were rated lower by LSS than by MLS, and for public library respondents, a striking 65 percent (eleven of the seventeen items) were rated lower by LSS than MLS. A whole series of basic cataloging tasks were rated lower by LSS from both academic and public libraries: using utilities, cataloging, and acquisitions ordering and receiving. Public library LSS rated knowing MARC formats and cataloging rules lower than MLS respondents did, as well as other basic knowledge (functionality of the integrated library system and materials processing). Overall, cataloging items were rated relatively low by all groups; either absolute-low, relative-low, or moderate. Only two items in the entire group were rated high, and those only by academic MLS respondents (using the integrated library system, and doing copy cataloging).

Technology was another area of relatively high disagreement, though more items were rated high. A quarter of items for academic respondents and 42 percent of items for public library respondents had higher MLS than LSS ratings. Public library LSS rated low, and lower than MLS respondents, using productivity software, doing triage on problems, and assisting users with equipment.

In the Teamwork set, treating others with respect, giving and receiving feedback, and treating users well were all rated highly but slightly lower by LSS than MLS in academic settings. Reference was an area where nearly all items were middle-rated, but LSS rated knowing ethical issues, making referrals, and instructing users less highly than did MLS respondents.

In Youth Services, knowing online tools and features, and conducting reference interviews were rated in the middle, but lower by LSS than MLS.

These areas where LSS viewed items, on average, as slightly less important (for themselves) than MLS did for them are consistent with the categories identified through examining low-rated items. There are several items that indicate that LSS do not see their role as patron assistance, or as knowing broad concepts. On the other hand, MLS seem firmly convinced of the importance of cataloging tasks for LSS.

#### *LSS Competencies, MLS Competences*

During 2009, the ALA Council voted formally to accept the LSS Competencies and MLS Competencies groups that had been developed within its constituent organizations. The Allied Professional Association division of ALA, with a large and diverse advisory council convened specifically for the project, created a certification system for support staff. For this, a set of three required and eight optional competencies were developed. Simultaneously, through the Committee on Education, a set of competences for beginning MLS librarians was developed; no parts are labeled optional—in several areas more advanced knowledge specific to an area of librarianship is assumed to be appropriate. Table 3 shows the basic areas aligned between the sets. A full comparison, including wording from each set, is available at the LSSCP website.

There are three main points to keep in mind when considering how the competencies relate to each other: scope of application, level of specificity, and fictional or recreational “information.” Only three LSS competency sets are required of all LSS. The MLS competences are designed for professionals in all libraries and information agencies (not just public or academic), and all are considered important.

The two sets have different levels of specificity. LSS competency language tends to be more specific with concrete examples. Some concepts in LSS that do not have exact equivalents in MLS can be considered to be included in the MLS competences’ broader language. A key example is the use in MLS of “all groups” vs. the more specific LSS “persons with disabilities” and other diversity concerns.

The question of fictional or recreational “information” is an example of a mismatch either of level of specificity or broad requirements in the two groups of competencies. The MLS competences throughout are phrased in terms of “information” while there are two LSS competencies (Adult Reader’s Advisory and Youth Services), which explicitly name recreational or noninformational library resources. It is not possible to review here arguments about whether “information” includes literature—a difference in specificity—or whether it represents a specialized area of librarianship, hence to be specifically left out of the MLS competences.

Table 3. Approved Competence(y) Sets

| MLS   | LSS                                |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. Foundations of the profession                      | Foundations [required]             |
| 2. Information resources                              | Access services                    |
|   | Collection management              |
| 3. Organization of recorded knowledge and information | Cataloging and classification      |
| 4. Technological knowledge and skills                 | Technology [required]              |
| 5. Reference and user services                        | Reference                          |
|   | Youth services                     |
|   | Adult readers advisory             |
| 6. Research   |                                    |
| 7. Continuing education and lifelong learning         |                                    |
| 8. Administration and management                      | Supervision and management         |
|   | Communications-Teamwork [required] |

Comparing the statements, there appears to be three sets of differences between the LSS and MLS competences. One involves a specific area that divides along classic workplace jurisdictional lines: access services. Then there is a group of more theoretical concepts: interpersonal relations, history and governance, and theory and research, in which LSS are distinctly different from MLS. Finally, the area of management itself is much more difficult to distinguish, in terms of the two sets of wording.

One entire LSS competency set involves Access Services. This is one of the most routine, customer-service tasks set in a library: processes that control patrons' use of library materials. The closest the MLS competencies approach this issue is within information resources, with "concepts and issues related to the lifecycle of recorded knowledge . . . through various stages of use" and "concepts, issues, and methods related to the management of various collections." This might be an issue of specificity; all MLS librarians may not work in institutions that circulate materials, but it also reflects a widely accepted division of labor where there is enough labor to be divided (McCleskey, 2003). That division reflects jurisdiction: clerks are those who do the actual circulation.

In terms of interpersonal relations, LSS competencies, in several different competency sets, are explicit and direct about positive relationships with patrons and with coworkers. Customer service and creating a welcoming atmosphere appear in Foundations, Youth Services, and Communications-Teamwork. Relations with coworkers make up the bulk of an entire, required, set: Communications-Technology. In contrast, it is difficult to identify this area specifically in the MLS competencies. In the Administration and Management section it mentions "the principles of effective personnel practices and human resource development." Other than that, all mentions of interaction with others appear in the context of patron services, not coworker relations.



It is difficult to argue that the reason for this difference is that at least some MLS librarians do not work with patrons or coworkers. Leadership is explicitly mentioned and it implies followers or at least colleagues to influence. Instead, it is possible that interpersonal relations is not mentioned because its importance is assumed, and reflects a "character" distinction at the level of librarian.

MLS librarians are expected to know the history not only of libraries but of human communication and information patterns; they also are expected to understand libraries and librarians within formal and informal (certification) governance structures. The emphasis in the LSS competencies is on knowledge of current library situations and of following existing laws, regulations, policies, and ethics.

Theory is extensively referenced throughout the MLS competencies. Knowledge of basic and applied theory in all areas of librarianship is seen as an essential element of professional librarianship. More, there is an entire, separate, "research" competence. While some data-gathering tasks do appear in the LSS competencies, they exist in relation to managerial activity such as supporting decisions on programming and resources. It is only the MLS librarian who is seen to have responsibility for understanding as well as generating foundational research in the field.

In the management area, the MLS competencies are direct about leadership, although somewhat less direct about management. They specifically speak of "principled, transformational leadership." Except for the title of "Administration and Management," they do not mention "management" per se, but include elements of it: planning and budgeting, assessment, and personnel. LSS competencies even in the direct "Supervision and Management" set are carefully phrased in assistive and supportive terms. The LSS does not develop new services, but develops recommendations for new services; gathers data, but to provide to others for assessment. It is in this area that the level, rather than the domain or subject area, seems the most clearly marked.

## DISCUSSION

A review of all of the data on which this article draws shows some patterns in jurisdiction, but also some of the problems in making this issue clear to patrons and the general public.

It seems clear that both MLS graduates and library support staff, and the bodies that represent them, view professional librarians as those who manage: libraries as institutions, information as resources, and human and technological systems for access and learning. Professionals are those who know and apply theories, and who understand and conduct research. Evaluation, related to research, is an essential component of management.

Library support staff perform many of the tasks that occur in public and academic libraries, in public services and in technical services. Access

is most strictly a support staff function. Perhaps because LSS are not (always) college graduates, some areas of interpersonal relations and “soft skills” that are ignored in the MLS competencies are spelled out as being important for LSS.

Some areas of direct patron service and of collection management (especially in the area of selection) are seen by MLS (somewhat more than LSS themselves) as within the jurisdiction of professional librarians. Not uniformly, and not very clearly, in any type of library. Both the design and also the delivery of patron instruction (in reference or in lifelong learning arenas) are seen as part of the MLS role.

Major problems in defining jurisdiction remain. These are problems that happen on a very local and specific level (who does what, under what circumstances, in this library), but also affect the definition of librarianship in the eyes of librarians and of the public. Even an area that has a long track record of moving work to support staff, cataloging, has some empirical evidence here to show that LSS do not rate these tasks very highly compared with MLS. Because cataloging is a function that occurs behind the scenes, it does affect how library work is organized and librarians view themselves, but disagreement has a limited effect on the public.

In public services, the differences are important because the public is affected. Someone working at a library has an encounter with a patron. Is it clear to the patron what the staff member’s level is and what the tasks are over which he or she has proper jurisdiction? From the survey and competency language evidence it appears that the professional is involved when

- the encounter requires a specially designed service (such as the selection of a direct or a tiered model for assistance);
- the encounter requires instruction;
- the encounter involves advanced (more than LSS “basic”) content knowledge.

According to the MLS competencies, the MLS librarian is appropriately—but not exclusively—involved in all patron use-of-information encounters. Some areas are handled by delegation: in design, management, and evaluation. In the LSS competencies, however, several specific direct patron encounter types are named as appropriate for LSS. That is, MLS librarians can do it all, but need not do much; they do all design, but not all delivery.

What this leaves out from the patron’s perspective is an understanding of what value librarians bring to the library that the patron uses. Do patrons appreciate the importance and value of underlying library-specific philosophy, history, theory, and research in making design decisions? If patrons see that librarians manage libraries and library agencies, but do not deliver specific services, will the concept of “management” become

divorced from librarianship—if librarians are managers, are they only managers?

In the theory of professions, a profession, among other things, has an exclusive area of expertise; this is its specific core jurisdiction. Some work within libraries requires high expertise but is not tied directly to libraries as such, and for this often highly-specialized non-MLS people are employed (Oberg, 1997). Within work that is specific to libraries, tasks fall somewhere within a spectrum of expertise related to: reference and instruction, collections, and organization of knowledge, supported by technology and management, within a context of library history, philosophy, and research.

Within functional domains, the levels of expertise are a moving target. This is to some extent inevitable since some of the objects of expertise are in technological flux. For example, productivity software was once an area of high expertise and is now routine at all levels of work. Collaboration in information organization has greatly reduced the quantity of expert labor of this kind that is required. The differing opinions about cataloging and technical services support staff roles reflect some ongoing struggles over jurisdiction; some argue that technological changes mean professionals are becoming more important than paraprofessionals (Howarth, 1998).

One object or domain of library work has not changed in its essence: the human patron. Tools for assistance and instruction have changed, but not the person they influence. Some areas of patron assistance, such as circulation, are indeed routine. These do not require any advanced level of expertise. Where professional jurisdiction is most appropriate is where the patron-information encounter is complex on either side. It can be complex on the patron side if the patron requires advanced assistance or instruction; it can be complex on the information side if the information is not collected and organized for ready use.

So, in the end, professionals exercise exclusive jurisdiction in libraries over

- history, philosophy, theory, and research;
- design and management of systems, processes, and collections;
- instruction and advanced assistance for patrons.

When tasks are defined and designed, then support staff follow. It is important for librarians, support staff, and library users to have as clear an understanding of these jurisdictional areas as possible, for the future viability of the professional level of librarianship. The processes of theory and design tend to be invisible but they are still essential to librarianship as a field.

Expertise also needs to be made visible. The key relationship of expertise to jurisdiction has further implications for education for library work and for research. At present, the structure of formal education for

support staff and for professional librarians is almost entirely separate. MLS programs are located at graduate-level institutions, which almost never offer associates-level degrees, the most common form of degree programs for library staff.

While many MLS programs are co-located with doctoral programs and specialist/post-masters certificates or degrees, those advanced qualifications are not formally required for practitioners as the field has no ongoing continuing education requirement. This might be because two of the largest sectors of librarianship are in contexts that also do not have continuing education requirements. Public librarians are often considered types of civil servants. Academic librarians often follow the model of the professoriate, which is theoretically engaged in continued scholarly development but not in the format of professionally-imposed continuing education certification.

The American Library Association's development of individual certification for library support staff, which is based on competencies and then requires ongoing education for renewal, is a key innovation. Master's-level, professional-level library educators would be wise to become more involved along two dimensions: working with the Association in defining the respective roles of support staff and professionals, and working with practitioners, who represent the institutional context of the profession, to ensure that the jurisdictions embedded in professional education are well-matched to real-world needs.

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## APPENDIX: LSS COMPETENCY ITEM RATINGS

The following identifies those items rated as high (above 2.75) or relative- (below 2.25) and absolute-low (below 2.0), by the different groups. For Youth Services, only data from public library respondents is considered as very few academic workers responded. Even Reader's Advisory had many more respondents from academia: 114 LSS (compared to thirty-five for Youth Services) and seventy-one MLS (thirty-two for Youth Services).

For all items, the *stem* is either "Know," or, "Be able to."

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### TEAMWORK: 20 ITEMS

None were rated low—absolute or relative.

For both academic and public, MLS and LSS respondents, six of the items are relative-high:

- Basic concepts of interpersonal relations, customer services, and communication.
- Treat others with respect, fairness, and consistency.
- Give and accept feedback from coworkers, supervisors, and patrons.

- Identify and manage misunderstandings constructively.
- Listen effectively, transmit information accurately and understandably, and seek constructive feedback.
- Treat users in a welcoming, professional manner and provide other staff with an example of positive customer service.

Public LSS respondents rate relative-high one more item:

- The importance of upholding policies and decisions.

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#### FOUNDATIONS: 11 ITEMS

One item was rated absolute-low (by one group)

One item was rated relative-high by all groups:

- Practice quality customer service.

Two items were rated relative-high by the public library respondents, both MLS and LSS:

- Communicate and promote the library's values and services to staff, volunteers, users, and the community.
- Recognize and respond to diversity in user needs and preferences for resources and services.

There was one item that was rated relative-low by all groups, and absolute-low by one group (academic MLS):

- How libraries are governed and funded and the place of libraries within organizations or government structures.

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#### TECHNOLOGY: 12 ITEMS

None were rated absolute-low by any group; three rated relative-low by MLS respondents.

Four items were rated relative-high by all four groups:

- Basic computer operations needed to access library applications software and productivity tools.
- Adapt to changes in technology.
- Transfer information gained from training into the workplace.
- Use information discovery tools including the library's catalog, core library databases, and Internet search engines.

Academic respondents, both LSS and MLS added a fifth:

- Use basic productivity software such as e-mail, word processing, and spreadsheets.

None of the items were rated relative-low by LSS respondents. MLS respondents from both public and academic libraries rated three items relative-low:

- General trends and developments of appropriate technology in all library functions and services.
- The role and responsibilities of libraries for introducing relevant applications of technology to the public, including assistive technology.
- Use basic assistive technologies, when appropriate, to ensure that all users have equitable access to technology.

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#### MANAGEMENT AND SUPERVISION: 20 ITEMS

Three were rated absolute-low; six were rated relative or absolute-low by at least one group.

Not one item was rated relative-high by MLS respondents from either public or academic libraries.

LSS themselves jointly considered three items relative-high, both public and academic:

- Principles of staff management, supervision, and discipline.
- Demonstrate leadership in a team environment.
- Build positive relationships between staff and users, applying concepts of user-oriented customer service.

Academic library LSS rated one other item relative-high:

- Implement sound management principles that encourage a positive work environment, using time and stress management skills.

Public library LSS rated one item relative-high:

- Uphold policies and decisions, using appropriate strategies to deliver difficult or sensitive information.

One item was rated relative or absolute-low by all respondent groups:

- The basic purposes and concepts of budgeting, grant writing, and fundraising. (absolute low, academic and public MLS)

Two others were rated relative or absolute-low by all except public library LSS:

- The value of planning library services based on community demographics and needs. (absolute-low, academic MLS)
- Identify community and user demographics and assist in planning library services based on those demographics and needs. (absolute-low, academic MLS)



MLS respondents in both academic and public libraries rated two items relative-low:

- Principles and the value of cooperation and collaborating with other libraries, agencies, and organizations.
- Develop and implement recommendations for new services and programs based on analysis and interpretation of data about various aspects of library operations.

On only one item did MLS respondents disagree, public vs. academic; public MLS respondents rated this low but academic MLS did not:

- Review existing and develop new policies and procedures.

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#### REFERENCE: 14 ITEMS

One was rated absolute-low by at least one group.

One was rated high by LSS in both academic and public libraries, but not by MLS in either:

- Search methods, display options, and terminology of the library's catalog, website, and other information access tools.

Only one item was rated high by MLS in either type of library, and only by those in academic libraries; it did not rate as relative-high in the estimation of LSS from either public or academic libraries:

- Judge when referrals are necessary and use appropriate referral procedures.

One item was rated relative-low by all groups, and absolutely-low by two groups, the MLS respondents:

- Assist users in understanding copyright policies.

The following item was rated relative-low by three out of four groups; only LSS in academic libraries rated it above the relative-low mark:

- Copyright issues pertaining to reference and information services.

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#### ACCESS SERVICES: 17 ITEMS

Three items were rated absolute-low.

Two items were rated relative-high by all four groups:

- Processes for circulating library materials.
- Represent the library through high-quality customer service.

One more was rated relative-high by three of the four groups with only MLS-academic rating it slightly below relative-high:

- Manage difficult people and situations and control emergencies.

On the academic side, out of the two groups and seventeen items, only one was rated relative-low, by MLS respondents:

- Apply policies and procedures to select the most appropriate source to meet resource-sharing needs.

In contrast, public library respondents had several low-rated items. Both MLS and LSS public library respondents rated three items relative-low and all of them were rated absolute-low by MLS respondents:

- Copyright issues pertaining to access functions such as reserves, document delivery, and interlibrary loan.
- Collect and report data on collections and services.
- Apply policies and procedures to select the most appropriate source to meet resource-sharing needs.

Three more items were rated relative-low by public library MLS respondents only:

- Policies and procedures for resource sharing among libraries.
- Identify materials for preservation or replacement.
- Manage appropriate technologies and equipment for resource sharing, reserves, and user services.

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#### MARKETING: 11 ITEMS

Four were rated absolute-low by at least one group.

Two items were rated high by all groups:

- Demonstrate effective communication, interpersonal, and customer service skills.
- Create a welcoming and user-friendly library environment to encourage use of the library and community support for the library.

Four items were rated absolute or relative-low by all groups. One was absolute-low:

- Assist in determining the library's target markets and appropriate service and collection responses.

Of the four, three items were rated absolute-low by MLS, though only relative-low by LSS:

- Assist with developing a marketing plan and evaluating its effectiveness.
- Identify and develop relationships with appropriate media outlets.
- Choose the most effective media for a target audience.

One item was rated absolute-low only by academic MLS; relative-low by others:

- Identify community partners and develop relationships to benefit libraries.

## YOUTH SERVICES: 16 ITEMS

*Only thirty-five academic LSS and thirty-two academic MLS answered this. Their data are not included.*

One item was rated absolute-low by at least one group.

There was one item rated relative-high by both groups (also by academic respondents):

- Establish a welcoming atmosphere and actively encourage youth participation in library programs and in the use of resources.

Only one item was rated as absolutely low, and only by MLS respondents:

- Advocacy, public relations, and networking techniques related to youth services.

Three items were rated as relative-low, by both MLS and LSS respondents:

- The stages of childhood and adolescent development.
- Advocacy, public relations, and networking techniques related to youth services.
- Assist with developing and marketing services for youth and their caregivers.

In addition, three items were rated relative-low by MLS respondents:

- Legal and other issues affecting library service to youth.
- Assist with selecting appropriate materials and developing a collection for youth.
- Work cooperatively with personnel in schools and other community agencies serving youth.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMMING: 6 ITEMS

Two items were rated absolute-low by at least one group.

No items in this area were rated high.

Out of these six items two were rated relative-low by all groups and absolutely low by MLS respondents:

- Basic curatorial principles of exhibits and how to apply them (absolute-low by public LSS).
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a program or an exhibit.

One additional item was rated relative-low by the MLS respondents, absolute-low by academic MLS, but not by LSS:

- Effectively plan and execute a program or an exhibit.

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### CATALOGING [AND ACQUISITIONS]: 17 ITEMS

One item was rated absolute-low by at least one group.

Two items were rated relative-high by MLS respondents only, and those only by MLS in academic libraries:

- Use the cataloging functions of a library's integrated library system
- Perform basic copy cataloging, including reviewing and editing cataloging records.

A total of four were rated relative-low by all groups, with one rated absolute-low by three of four groups.

- Basic concepts of metadata schemes (absolute-low by MLS-academic, LSS-public, MLS-public; 2.07 by LSS-academic).
- Apply basic metadata schemes.
- Monitor spending from budget lines; adjust spending patterns as appropriate.
- Use standard sources for collection development and procurement.

Public library MLS and LSS respondents jointly rated a fifth item low:

- Basic organization of the publishing industry and familiarity with vendors of materials, supplies, equipment, and services.

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### READER'S ADVISORY: 13 ITEMS

Seven items were rated absolute-low by at least one group.

This has a very high number of low items—in fact, when items were rated low, they were generally low in an absolute as well as relative sense. For academic library respondents (comparatively few in number), nine of thirteen were rated relative-low and six were rated absolute-low even by LSS respondents. Even for those from public libraries, six were rated relative-low and three were absolute-low even by LSS respondents. It is possible that it is the very specific format of these items that was at issue.

These are the items rated absolute-low by at least one group.

For the following, even public library respondents rated them low:

- Popular and classic fiction, including a knowledge of authors, various fiction genres and popular, current non-fiction.
- Popular and classical music, including a general knowledge of performers and composers.
- A variety of films, including a general knowledge of directors and actors in different film and media genres.
- Briefly and sufficiently describe the plot of a book, film, or other media and its appeal.

- Help develop and implement programs based on the library collections, such as book discussions, summer reading programs, film, and media programs.
- Write reviews about items in the library collection.
- Compile resource lists and displays of books, recordings, films, and media by genre, historical period, subject or author, composer or director.

There was a single item that was rated relative-high, though only by the LSS in public libraries:

- Assist users with finding specific titles in their preferred format.

One item was rated relative-low by academic library respondents but not low by public library respondents:

- Make connections between users' interests and similar works.

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#### COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT: 9 ITEMS

Two were rated absolute-low by at least one group.

No items were rated relative-high by any group.

There was a distinct difference in relative-low ratings by type of library. For academic library respondents, only one item was rated relative-low:

- Recommend procedures for acquisition, circulation, and weeding of library materials.

For public library respondents, almost all items—seven out of nine—were rated low, and all of them low by both LSS and MLS respondents. The last two were rated absolute-low—but only by MLS respondents.

- The general purpose of collection development and management in libraries, and the value of consortial partnerships.
- General selection and deselection criteria.
- The policies for accepting gifts of library materials.
- Use standard methods for material retention, replacement, rebinding, weeding, storage, and preservation.
- Perform basic repair of materials of various formats.
- Recommend procedures for acquisition, circulation and weeding of library materials. (absolute-low MLS academic and public)
- Maintain the collection using standard preservation techniques. (absolute-low by MLS-public)